

## **Is the debate between Rawlsians and liberal perfectionists about aesthetics?**

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*Abstract.* Does the debate between Rawlsians and liberal perfectionists boil down to the following: for liberal perfectionists, the government should fund aesthetic projects that are in good taste; for Rawlsians, the government should be neutral on the aesthetic value of anything? If so, liberal perfectionists are committed to the view that there is objective aesthetic value. In this paper, I argue that within the Rawlsian system is a thesis that is difficult to reconcile with objectivity about aesthetics.

What is the difference between Rawlsian liberalism and liberal perfectionism? Is there actually any difference?<sup>1</sup> An impression one might have from examples discussed in the literature is that there is at least one significant difference: liberal perfectionists believe that the government should promote aesthetic projects that are in good taste, whereas Rawlsians believe that the government should be neutral on the aesthetic value of anything (e.g. Chan 2000: 14; Quong 2011: 62).

There is a brief way of disputing this impression. In the contemporary literature, a person qualifies as a liberal perfectionist if their beliefs about what the government should do are sufficient for them to count as a liberal and they also think that the government should spend some taxpayer money on trying to enable aesthetic or scientific or sporting achievements, because of the intrinsic value of such achievements.<sup>2</sup> Thus it seems possible to be a liberal perfectionist and not care about aesthetic achievement at all, for example by only endorsing

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<sup>1</sup> A review of a book about the two political philosophies claims that Rawls's philosophy and an influential form of liberal perfectionism threaten to collapse into one another (Simmons 2012: 1064).

<sup>2</sup> These are some ways of qualifying as a liberal perfectionist, but not necessarily the only ways.

perfectionist policies in relation to winning international sporting competitions. Such a person does not care if their national team wins by “ugly” means. They regard winning as of intrinsic value, but are indifferent to the means taken to victory. A liberal perfectionist, it seems, is not necessarily a liberal perfectionist aesthete. Unfortunately, the use of “perfectionist” in contemporary political philosophy can easily mislead.

So far I have only questioned one side of the proposal for where the difference between Rawlsians and liberal perfectionists lies: that liberal perfectionists believe that the government should promote aesthetic projects that are in good taste. What about the other side – that Rawlsians believe that the government should be neutral on the aesthetic value of anything? Although they probably do indeed believe this, there is a feature of Rawls’s philosophy which does not look neutral at all. When we ask whether something has aesthetic value or not, this feature generates a pressure towards denying aesthetic value in most or all cases. But one has to engage in an elaborate analysis to uncover this feature. I present this analysis below.

In *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls proposes certain principles that he believes a liberal society should implement. Here we need not go into exactly what these principles are. But let us ask, “How does he argue for his principles?” He relies on a reflective equilibrium method (1999: 41). Put bluntly, his argument is as follows: “Premise 1: if the reflective equilibrium method supports my principles, then a liberal society should implement them. Premise 2: the reflective equilibrium method supports my principles. Therefore a liberal society should implement my principles.”

What is this reflective equilibrium method? Here is an initial statement of it. The method involves a person taking their moral judgments about specific situations, such as that it is wrong for the current government of the UK to allow all the gold in the country leave, and then trying to

develop a set of general principles that entails these judgments. If the proposed principles fail to entail most of these judgments, then one should reject these principles. But if they do entail most of them, then the option is available to reject the few judgments that do not fit with the principles. Rawls thinks that if readers carry out this method properly, they will arrive at the principles that he recommends.

This initial statement does not quite capture Rawls's version of the reflective equilibrium method. There are various qualifications one has to add, or other amendments one has to make, to capture it exactly. In this paper, my focus will be on one qualification.<sup>3</sup> Rawls does not ask his readers to pay attention to all the moral judgments they make. Rather he asks them to pay attention to moral judgments made in certain states of mind – states of mind that are more likely to result in reliable judgments. (I shall describe these states of mind as more suitable for making judgments in.) Rawls writes:

...we may discard those judgments made with hesitation, or in which we have little confidence. Similarly, those given when we are upset or frightened, or when we stand to gain in one way or the other can be left aside. All these judgments are likely to be erroneous or to be influenced by an excessive attention to our own interests. (1999: 42)

Soon afterwards Rawls tells us:

And once we regard the sense of justice as a mental capacity, as involving the exercise of thought, the relevant judgments are those given under conditions favourable for deliberation and judgment in general. (1999: 42)

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<sup>3</sup> A qualification that I shall not focus on is that Rawls allows more general moral judgments to enter the reflective equilibrium procedure (Tersman 2018: 10).

Here Rawls writes specifically about the sense of justice, because it is moral judgments about justice that he is interested in. But, as the rest of the quotation indicates, for Rawls it does not matter whether one is making a judgment about a scientific topic or an aesthetic topic or a moral topic, or any other kind of topic. There are some states of mind that are more suitable for making judgments in and others that are less suitable, and it is the same states that are more suitable, whatever the topic.

This general thesis leads Rawls to ignore what goes on in some states of mind when using the reflective equilibrium method, so it has an important role to play in justifying his version of that method. But Rawls does not argue for the general thesis. He simply asserts it. The thesis is not self-evident, so he needs an argument.

Furthermore, there is a challenge to it. Being frightened is usually not a good condition for forming reliable judgments about something, but consider the following situation. It is night and some children are telling ghost stories, while camping. Afterwards, one child says that ghosts are not frightening. Then someone comes along and makes a ghost-like sound outside their tent. The children believe it is a ghost and are frightened. At this point, they are disposed to judge that ghosts are frightening. The earlier judgment that ghosts are not frightening is undermined, even though it was made when they were not frightened.

Let us turn from this example to a theory. The theory is composed of two claims. (a) Some things really are frightening. (b) If a person does not suffer from phobias or other psychological disorders, is not under the influence of any drug and is frightened by a certain thing, then it is likely that this thing really is frightening. The theory presented entails that being in a frightened state is good for finding out that something is frightening, given the appropriate

psychological background.<sup>4</sup> In which case, this state of mind is suitable for making some judgments, contrary to Rawls's view. Being frightened is good for judging that something is frightening! How might Rawlsians respond to this theory? They could accept (a) but deny (b). But this combination is hard, if not impossible, to justify. Alternatively, they could deny (a) and say that nothing is actually frightening. It is just that one has a reaction of fright and erroneously attributes the quality of being frightening to whatever caused the reaction. It is easier to defend Rawls's general thesis by offering this response, but Rawlsian reflective equilibrium is not meant to be a method that is only available to subjectivists<sup>5</sup> about the frightening.

Perhaps being frightening is not an aesthetic property, but similar points could be raised about uncontroversial cases of aesthetic properties, such as being poetic. If something is poetic, the best state of mind for detecting this does not seem to be the kind of state which is best for judging that the round-earth theory is better than the flat-earth theory. It would seem to be a state of poetic enchantment caused by the poetic thing.

Here is a summary of my analysis. Rawls argues for his liberal principles by saying that his reflective equilibrium method supports them. His method involves taking moral judgments from some states of mind only and trying to develop a set of principles which entails those judgments. When we ask why he ignores judgments made in other states of mind, his answer is a general thesis: there are some states of mind that are more suitable for making judgments in, whatever the topic, and some which are less suitable, and the ignored judgments are those made in less suitable states. But Rawls does not argue for the general thesis. This would not be a problem if the thesis were self-evident, but actually it is very controversial. One area in which it

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<sup>4</sup> It may be that some other conditions must be included to properly capture the appropriate psychological background. I proceed on the assumption that (b) fully captures the conditions.

<sup>5</sup> To be a subjectivist about the frightening, as I am using the term, is to deny that there are frightening things. Anyone who holds that there are frightening things is an objectivist, even if they understand the quality of being frightening in a way that makes references to mental states (see McDowell 1985: 113-114).

is very controversial is aesthetics. The thesis is far easier to reconcile with subjectivism about aesthetic qualities than objectivism, when Rawls is supposed to be neutral on the debate between subjectivists and objectivists – his conclusions and methods are supposed to be equally available to citizens who hold different views on this debate. So if a neutral Rawls is to justify his version of reflective equilibrium, he needs a justification which does not involve this general thesis.

“Neutral” is a term imported from elsewhere and it is reasonable to ask for a clarification of its use here, but the problem can roughly be stated while dispensing with the term and without a definition in its place. The problem is that reflective equilibrium is not the widely available method it aspires to be, when based on this general thesis: it is either not available to objectivists about aesthetic value or only available to peculiar kinds of objectivists, who somehow manage to make their objectivism cohere with the thesis. Although the policies of liberal perfectionist aesthetes may be very similar to Rawlsian policies, they are likely to reject his argument if they are aware that it depends on the general thesis and aware of the implications of this thesis for aesthetics. Can Rawlsians not just switch to a more restricted thesis that concerns morality alone? A justification for the more restricted thesis is required that does not derive it from the general thesis and at present it is unclear what that justification is. At present, we should be open to the possibility that states of mind which Rawls ignores, such as being angry or upset or even intoxicated,<sup>6</sup> are sometimes of value for making moral judgments.

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<sup>6</sup> Apart from liberal perfectionism, Rawls is also opposed to utilitarianism (1999: 14). Recent research provides some evidence that people who are drunk are more likely to respond to various situations in the way that act utilitarianism recommends (Duke and Bègue 2015). A utilitarian might well say that being drunk reduces social inhibitions, which enables people to arrive at the correct judgments.

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